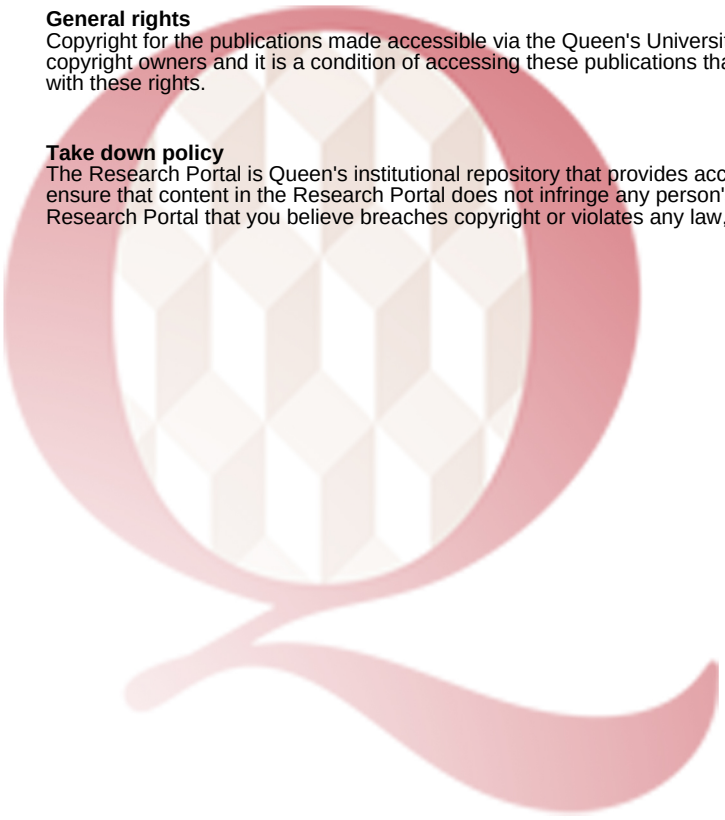
Defining Democracy: Voting Procedures in Decision-making, Elections and Governance

Hayward, K. (2015). Defining Democracy: Voting Procedures in Decision-making, Elections and Governance. Representation, 51(2), 269-271. DOI: 10.1080/00344893.2015.1064225

Published in:
Representation

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version



Author's Pre-print version, March 2015. Published in Representation, Vol. 51, Iss. 2, 2015, pages 269-271

The Perils of Either/Or

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Defining Democracy: Voting procedures in decision-making, elections and governance.
Peter Emerson. London: Springer (2012, 2nd edn), 192pp.

One of the most striking lessons to be drawn from *Defining Democracy* is that western culture embodies a zero sum mentality: winner takes all. Moreover, it explains how this same culture has come to embed a respect for competition (a form of conflict) that pitches individuals and groups against each other in all walks of life. In this environment, nuance and complexity is shunned in preference for a clear outcome. Emerson claims that the roots of this are found in the use of 'opposites' in early Greek thought and philosophy, which itself fed into western religious tendencies to categorise 'beliefs as true or false, practices as righteous or evil, and choices as between heaven and hell' (p.4). This embedding of binary choices and binary outcomes, he argues, has resulted in a 'propensity to reduce every complex dispute to a dichotomy' (p.4); all political debates thereby become a matter of choice between us/them and either/or.[1] In a clever line of reasoning, Emerson shows that this binary thinking explains the rationale for western European understanding of what modern democracy should be: after the downfall of kings and the collapse of empires, if 'minority rule were wrong, its opposite was bound to be right' (p.4). Healthy democracy and political order thus required that the 'will of the people' is, by definition, the voice of the majority.

There are several negative outcomes arising from this assumption in western notions of democracy that Emerson explores. The first is the conceptualisation of the role of elections. Emerson claims that there are two key flaws in a majoritarian electoral system: first, the assumption that majority opinion may be garnered from majority vote; second, the use of a majority vote by those in power in order manipulate the rest, i.e. to corral dissenters/minorities into the majority's view of what is 'right'.

A second outcome, vis-à-vis governance, is the assumption that western democracy upholds, in essence, the right of a majority to overrule a minority as long as it comes after a period of debate. Emerson's contention with the use of debate in majoritarian systems (or versions of the same) is twofold. First, during the election (or referendum) campaign, the debate is framed in dichotomous language; afterwards, the role of debate in governance is unlikely to evoke any significant change because the outcome of it will be measured in zero-sum terms. Thus, the problem is not just that the political system is one of winners versus losers; the problem is that

[1] This explains the cultural logic behind the process of social categorisation described in Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, which over-emphasises commonalities between group members and understates differences between them. In so doing, this process obfuscates the many and varied layers of group membership and degrees of 'belonging' that individuals hold vis-à-vis others. See Henri Tajfel (ed.) (1982) *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*, Cambridge University Press.

it gives the winners too much power and the losers too little say (p.101). A meaningful alternative, such as deliberative modes of democracy, would generate a wider scope of potential outcomes from debate at all stages of the democratic process. One criticism of this may be that these 'alternatives' overestimate the power of debate to either engage people or to make much of a difference to their views. But Emerson's reply may be that, again, this is a consequence of the competitive culture and binary thinking into which we have been socialised – if debate and deliberation are to result in progress rather than further entrenchment and conflict, people need to be willing to find similarity and common cause. Without such measures, most democratic systems will function in full knowledge that the views of the 'silent majority' (or, as Emerson has it, 'silenced majority') sit somewhere in the centre of the binary choice presented. Because the elected majority sets the question, the remainder of the electorate is limited to *either* agreeing *or* disagreeing with its view.

A third, perhaps most damning, consequence of western democracy is the reach of this adversarial democratic thought into other parts of the world; the colonial spread of 'civilisation' has not only overthrown other forms of decision-making but has, Emerson claims, actually generated conflict. In the context of many post-colonial states, the construction of a 'democratic system' along the lines modelled by western states (i.e. with political parties distinguished from one another by fundamental lines of division, including religious denomination) served to make otherwise benign social differences a source of significant political difference. The case of Rwanda is a sobering one; Emerson (in an argument not unlike Brubaker's account of the construction of national identities in the former USSR)[2] claims that the genocide there at the end of the twentieth century had its roots not in deep tribal enmities but in the institutionalisation of social categories by the Belgian colonial power (p.16). Western democracy is assumed to be the alternative to political conflict but Emerson goes so far as to say that 'majority voting is a cause of war' (p.142). Furthermore, he argues, many power-sharing arrangements institutionalise the very sectarianism they were supposed to obviate (p.112). Consociationalism, for example, still upholds a dualist conception that requires conflict between groups, instead of a pluralist system which requires consensus to be found.

Further to this, in revealing the myopia of binary thought in European culture, Emerson moves on to reveal the misconstrued basis of many core assumptions about the nature of democracy that we 'westerners' hold dear. Chief among these, of course, is the view that a one- or no-party state is intrinsically anti-democratic. Uganda is one instance, Emerson claims, in which the single party system was preferable to one in which multiparty elections can act as a conduit for violence. However, Emerson is on more problematic territory here, having arguably allowed his objection to the imposition of western norms of democracy to overshadow the rights of citizens to engage with the type of activities crucial to debate and consensus-finding. On this occasion, the limitations of Emerson's focus on political mechanisms rather than social conditions are evident.

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[2] Rogers Brubaker (1996) *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press.

This, then, is not just a textbook about democracy and its various forms – it is a thesis and its wide-ranging and informative overview of various forms of democratic mechanism is conducted in light of this thesis. Yet its value, import and quality is none the less for this; the author clearly delights in expounding his thesis and he retains the attention of the reader throughout with engaging insights and entertaining asides. One of the elements of this book that makes the most impact is its Appendices. The listing, for example, of all referenda which have produced results of 49<51% is astounding, as is the list of all parliamentary votes that have been won by the power-of-one vote. Such cases beg for counter-factual or 'what if' speculation. What if, for instance, Frank Maguire MP had not abstained in the vote of confidence in Prime Minister Callaghan in 1978, enabling Labour to stay in power and delaying the election won by Margaret Thatcher? From such scenarios to a chronology of western democracy, the appendices are informative and thought-provoking and make an essential contribution to the book, further demonstrating that the author's thesis is based on an impressively wide historical and geographical scope of knowledge on the topic.

Emerson's definition of democracy that comes towards the book's conclusion is explicitly one of a consensual and representative rather than adversarial and majoritarian form. These are seven theses that are confidently put; from 'a free and fair, proportional and preferential electoral system' to consensus decision-making and a written constitution, the grounds for his analysis have been clearly set out in the preceding text, using wide ranging examples and a consistent logic. It is obvious that the purpose of the book is, therefore, not only to 'define democracy', but to outline its various forms around the world and, in so doing, to demonstrate the inadequacy (and, indeed, dangers) of equating democracy with majority rule. In so doing, Emerson seeks to challenge not just a mode of governance but also a mode of thought. It is for this reason, no doubt, that he has encountered such resistance from so many quarters (academics, journalists, politicians themselves) to his quest for an alternative mode of decision-making (better described here as 'consensus-finding'), specifically the Borda Count method. Emerson seems somewhat surprised, and perhaps a little hurt, that the elites and the voters which uphold the status quo in western democracies are still so resistant to his logic. Yet this book effectively explains why this is so: we have been socialised to think that any dilution or change to the party system risks the creation of a vacuum, instability – in short, an end to democracy. Thus, those who seek to challenge the dominant assumptions about – and mechanisms of – democracy in western states today will struggle to get their views heard; after all, they are in a dissenting minority.